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ABSTRACT

Freewriting, according to Peter Elbow, is based on an equal affirmation of the student's experience, and his or her right to ground behaviors and writing in those experiences. Insofar as the term "free" in freewriting can be linked to a notion that expression is an event which occurs between a socially and culturally autonomous subject and him/herself, however, freewriting becomes a disciplinary technique. Bringing cultural politics to bear on the deceptively innocent association between "freedom" and "writing" does not mean, however, that freewriting itself must be entirely dismissed. Freewriting in a cultural context might transform into strategic rewriting, where students engage their voices critically as a way of enabling a voice, positioning and re-positioning themselves on the borders of their own highly contextualized communication. Stanley Aranowitz and others seek a pedagogy that replaces the authority of both rhetorical recitation and its co-ordinate opposite, autonomous expression, so that the possibility of practicing difference (fraying the boundaries of "freedom" and "expression" by making known the cultural politics that inform them) emerges. These are the challenges culturally displaced students bring to writing teachers today. (PRA)

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CCCC Convention
Boston

Michael Hill
March 1991

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I want to begin my contribution to this discussion by taking a moment to say something about what I think are the two most important terms in my title: the terms 'cultural politics' and 'writing,' or more specifically 'freewriting.' I do not wish to be aligned with the so-called 'anti-expressive' or 'traditionalist' position associated with the names Berlin, Fish or others who might be called the arch-critics of democratic pedagogy; nor, however, do I speak without criticism about the 'revolutionary' work of Macrorie, Elbow or any number of the teacher/writers who follow them in a recently published collection of essays that celebration free-writing's vast potential (*Nothing Begins with N: New Investigations of Freewriting*, ed. Belanoff, Elbow and Fontaine). My critique emerges as the result of an interest in a position (or positions) that, for a variety of interesting and complicated reasons which I will go on to at least to scratch the surface of, have generally floated outside the poles of the 'expressivism' v. 'anti-expressivism' debate. It is a position which, as the composition classroom becomes more culturally diverse, deserves more attention from composition scholarship. It is position from which remarks like Trinh Minh-ha's, that

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"I have no desire to express myself," become less enigmatic, less likely to be written off as alien.

I suspect that introducing the cultural poltics of expression threatens to problematizes the very assumptions that have allowed the 'expressivism' debate to develop within the deceptively homogeneous boundaries that it has, and perhaps this in itself accounts for the difficulty and 'un-natural' feel of making ourselves accountable to cultural difference. Be that as it may, I see this essay as an attempt to respond productively to what Andrea Lunsford emphasized in her Chair's Address at the 1989 CCCC's Convention, as the "non-innocent, never neutral, value-laden nature of the technology of writing" (*CCCC*, February 1990, 72). In this instance, I would like to include the 'technology' of free-writing within the context of cultural value.

I assume that most of us are by now familiar with the term if not the fundamental claims of free-writing. The names Murray, Belanoff, Stewart, Kelly and as I've mentioned Peter Elbow and Ken Macrorie, are most often mentioned as proponents of this approach. "Freewriting," Elbow writes, is based on "an equal affirmation of the student's experience, and his [or her] right to ground his [her] behaviors and writing

in those experiences" (Elbow, *Embracing Contraries*, 69). It is an approach designed to emphasize the development of "individual becoming," as Joy Ritchie calls it, commensurate, and indeed necessary for, the "process of socialization" (Ritchie, "Beginning Writers: Diverse Voices and Individual Identity," *CCC*, 152). Freewriting is often invested in the highest hopes of democratic values, hopes that each student will embrace and overcome what Diane George and Art Young call, too uncritically, a "denigration in thinking: 'I'm not deep enough'" (*NBN*, 112).

The value of freewriting, here written in terms of the need for 'depth', is elsewhere perhaps more dubiously written as a moral act of liberation, a release of an urgency of expression that is supposedly locked up somewhere within the universal category of consciousness. In 1977 Michael Southwell writes, "freewriting liberates students from the fear of saying something incorrectly . . . and, by acting upon what are probably his or her most deeply felt beliefs, permits them to say something meaningful" ("Freewriting in the Composition Class, *College English*, 677). I find this remark significant from a cultural perspective for a number of reasons, most notably in the assumed connection between meaning and human autonomy. According to Southwell, 'meaning' is 'permitted' as an

'act' of coming to know qualities of a 'self' which is supposedly always already there beyond less valued linguistic constraints. These constraints are devalued or less meaninful by being exterior constraints to a suppressed kernal of integrity. Southwell's emphasis on an *a prior* human subject extends Elbow's more rhetorically minded desire for "making the writing process transparent" (Elbow, *Writing With Power*, 15), to the logical end of a transparency of consciousness. As Southwell moves the 'meaning'='subjectivity' adequation to the morality of freedom (a caper at least old as Plato, but perhaps never so systematically wielded as in the European Enlightenment, cf. Althusser in "Marx's Relation to Hegel"), the culturally and historically specific discursive conditions for establishing the interiority of 'self,' and a taste for its expression, slip from view. However, once the 'meaning'='subjectivity' adequation is re-contextualized by a cultural and historical approach, that is, pushed up to that surface of restrictive of 'correctness' Southwell falsely limits to grammatical standards, expressive *permission* loses its innocence and risks becoming expressive *enforcement*.

One of the more notorious examples of the cultural bias implicit in the 'meaning'='subjectivity' adequation can be found in Hegel's notes on

Africa. Although the work of Hegel (which placed standards in the history of Western philosophy that have gone unchallenged arguably up until Louis Althusser) is generally well known, his alarming intolerance of cultural difference is worth reproducing here. In *The Philosophy of History,* Hegel presents his account of the African's relation to culture and history. "Africa proper," he writes, "as far as history goes back, has remained shut up; it is the godland compressed within itself--the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night" (as quoted by Henry Louis Gates, *Figures in Black*, 19). The "African character" is unknowable to Hegel since the African has failed to make himself transparent, or has rejected the 'day' of self-consciousness. "The African," Hegel continues, " has not yet attained the realization of any substantial objective existence . . . in which he realizes his own being" (Gates, *FB*, 20). The "peculiar African character" is incomprehensible since he has "not reached the principle which naturally accompanies all our ideas--the universal category of consciousness" (Gates, *FB*, 19).

Note how non-self-consciousness is summarily devalued and written out of the realm of possibilities by assigning it to the negative component

of both the "lightness" / "darkness" and the "child" / "maturity" dichotomy. This strategy helps prescribe the necessity of knowing a self as the founding principle of meaningful existence. The word "yet" in the phrase "has not *yet* attained the realization of any substantial objective existence," serves to posit the category of self as a natural telos at the end and at the pinnacle of the movement of history, and to deviate from this inevitable progress of universal human development is, for Hegel, to step outside the realm of humanity.

As you may know there has been a lot of effort in this century to escape the stubborn grip of Hegelian humanism. Marcel Mauss as early as the 1930's, and Levi-Strauss among others through the middle of the century, presented early indications that the West's pre-occupation with individuality is less something to do with what is *natural* than it is, to borrow Raymond Williams term, the result of a politically productive process of *naturalization*. More recently and perhaps with more influence, Michel Foucault (who has been receiving a lot of attention in *College English* in the last couple of years) has moved us their structural and marxist-scientific essentialisms towards what he calls (vis a vis Nietzsche) a 'genealogy' of the human subject.

For Foucault, the eighteenth century represents the site at which selfhood emerges as the primary agent in the re-configuration of power and knowledge at a number of levels. Foucault emblematizes this discursive rift in his account of the democratic liberalism of the French Revolution, dependant, in his words, on the "Rousseauist dream." "It was a dream," notes Foucault, "that each individual, whatever position he occupied, might be able to see the whole of society, that men's hearts should communicate, their vision inward unobstructed by obstacles, and that the opinion of all reign over each" (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 152). This 'dream,' whether enforced in Bentham's now famous panopticon, the institutional management of the insane, or the decision to go literally inward in the form of internal exploration to locate medical truth (all eighteenth century occurrences), are for Foucault a matter of 'discipline' in both senses of the term, that is, in the sense of producing subjects of, and subjects for, knowledge. 'Discipline' signals the advent of a new economy of power, an economy of interior enquiry which at its most efficient fixes subjects at the level of desire, and erases the limits and constituency of its own creation. In other words, 'discipline' makes every promise except for what Gayatri Spivak calls the "complete textualization

of individual identity itself" ("Postcolonialism and Value").

Let me give you some specific examples of writers for whom the 'disciplinary' feature of subjectivity which I have tried to make apparent in theory, would be a practical burden. These examples have helped me to think about the difficulties my non-Western students have in freewriting. In an article that appeared in *College Composition and Communication* a couple of years ago, the author recalls the imposition of identity as a pedagogical technique. "To be truly 'myself'," he writes, which I know was the key to my success in learning English composition, meant not to be my Chinese self at all . . . a self which was after all, always subordinated to some other collective body. That is to say, I had to wrestle with and abandon a whole system of ideology which previously defined me . . . . I had to learn to look at and understand the world from the point of view of Western 'idealism'"("The Classroom and the Wider Culture: Identity as a Key to Learning English Composition," *CCC*, 462).

The cultural and political ramifications of owning experience, or of the self as an autonomous possession become disturbingly clear in Thomas Sanders' essay: "Tribal Literature: Individual Identity and the Collective Unconscious." Sanders notes that once the Anglo accepted the reasoned

definition of himself as self-conscious, he was barred from participating in the "collectivity that binds the tribal unit, making it an equal element of a perfect universal whole" (Sanders, *CCC*, 258). For Sanders, the egoism which "elevates the individual to a position of assumed pre-eminence . . . leads to fragmentation, and results in such things as seeing the land as a commodity of private ownership" rather than a sacred combination of exterior and varied forces. Both examples forefront identity as a situated occurrence or an effect of social paradigms which, as they occur in the West, mistakenly fetishize expression as a trans-contextual given and cover up expression's constitutive relation to a world which preceeds it. To my mind, these writers suggest that any utterence occurs, as Lester Faigly has admirably noted, in a momentary negotiation within a specific set of discursive relations where identity plays a secondary and discontinuous role. Insofar as the term 'free' in freewriting can be linked to a notion that expression is an event which occurs between a socially and culturally autonomous subject and him/herself, freewriting becomes a disciplinary technique.

Bringing cultural politics to bear on the deceptively innocent association between 'freedom' and 'writing' does not mean that

'freewriting' itself must be entirely dismissed. As others are beginning to notice, a more challenging possibility faces us, one which would re-cast the dubious idea of the self's 'free' relation to the production of knowledge, along the more culturally responsible lines of regarding the self as a sight of social conflict within language. Let me make some tenative suggestions of what this might mean for freewriting.

Freewriting in a cultural context might transform into "strategic re-writing," a term Cornel West has used as a way to empahasize two things: first, how and why a particular identity is possible; and second, more importantly, the need (re)locate the differences which are excluded at a given moment subjective positioning. In "strategic re-writing" as in "process writing" at its best, students engage their own voices critically as a way of enabling a voice, positioning and re-positioning themselves on the borders of their own highly contextualized communication.

The "border pedagogy" explicit in Stanley Aranowitz's *Postmodern Education* (the first book of its kind) works according to the same process. Aronowitz seeks a pedegogy that replaces the authority of both rhetorical recitation and its co-ordinate opposite: autonomous expression, so that a third possibility emerges. That possibility is, for Aranowitz and others,

the possibility of practicing difference, that is, of fraying the boundaries of 'freedom' and 'expression' by making known the cultural poltics that inform them. These I believe are the challenges culturally displaced students bring to us as writing teachers today.

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